

Hegel's Ethical Thought

ALLEN W. WOOD



Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1990

First published 1990
Reprinted 1991, 1993, 1995

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wood, Allen W.

Hegel's ethical thought / Allen W. Wood.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-521-37432-4. — ISBN 0-521-37782-X (pbk.)

1. Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 1770-1831 — Ethics. 2. Ethics,
Modern — 18th century. 3. Ethics, Modern — 19th century. 4. Ethics,
German. I. Title.

B2949.E8W66 1990

170'.92 — dc20 89-77466

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wood, Allen W.

Hegel's ethical thought.

1. Ethics. Theories of Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich,

1770-1831

I. Title

170.92

ISBN 0-521-37432-4 hardback

ISBN 0-521-37782-X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xvii
Introduction	I
1. Hegel as speculative philosopher	I
2. Dialectical logic	I
3. Speculative logic is dead; but Hegel's thought is not	4
4. Speculative philosophy and modern society	6
5. Does Hegel have an ethics?	8
6. Rationality and actuality	10
7. Hegel's practical philosophy	11
Part I: Hegelian ethical theory	
1 Self-actualization	17
1. Ethical theory and self-awareness	17
2. Spirit	19
3. Modern self-understanding	21
4. Abstract right	22
5. Morality	23
6. Modern ethical life	26
7. The modern state	27
8. A self-actualization theory	30
9. Historicized naturalism	33
2 Freedom	36
1. Hegel and freedom	36
2. Freedom as possibility and freedom as actuality	37
3. Freedom and autonomy	39
4. Freedom as a good	40
5. Does positive freedom lead to totalitarianism?	41
6. Absolute self-activity	42
7. Self-activity and otherness	44
8. "Being with oneself"	45
9. Freedom in my determinations	47
10. A system of objective freedom	49
11. Hegelian freedom and ordinary freedom	51

CONTENTS

3	Happiness	53
1.	Happiness: ancient and modern	53
2.	The issue of objectivity	53
3.	The issue of egoism	56
4.	The natural will, resolve, and choice	58
5.	Kant's idea of happiness	60
6.	The indeterminacy of happiness	63
7.	Why do we care about happiness?	66
8.	The priority of freedom over happiness	69
9.	Right in general	71
10.	Hegel's institutionalism	73
Part II: Abstract right		
4	Recognition	77
1.	The right to abstract freedom	77
2.	Fichte's theory of recognition	77
3.	"A human being becomes human only among others"	79
4.	The relation of right	81
5.	The desire for self-certainty	84
6.	The struggle for recognition	85
7.	Master and servant	86
8.	Universal self-consciousness	88
9.	Hegel's dialectic of recognition	90
10.	The reality of oppression	92
5	Persons, property, law	94
1.	Persons and their abstract right to things	94
2.	Property as the fundamental right	96
3.	Self-appropriation and slavery	97
4.	The right to personality itself	99
5.	The limits of abstract right	101
6.	Abstract right and positive law	103
7.	Private property	106
6	Punishment	108
1.	Retributivism	108
2.	Punishment as the restoration of right	110
3.	The nullity of the criminal will	112
4.	Consenting to be punished	114
5.	The incompleteness of Hegel's theory	115
6.	Violations of right and violations of law	118
7.	The measure of punishment	119
8.	The death penalty	121
9.	Should we expect an ethical justification of punishment?	122

CONTENTS

Part III: Morality

7	The concept of morality	127
1.	Development of the concept of morality: Tübingen and Bern (1793-1796)	127
2.	Beyond morality: Frankfurt (1796-1800)	128
3.	Morality versus ethical life: Jena (1801-1806)	131
4.	The <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> (1807)	133
5.	Subjectivity	134
6.	The moral ought and objectivity	135
7.	Subjectivity and action	137
8	The moral will	140
1.	Imputability	140
2.	Moral luck and negligence	142
3.	The good	144
4.	Kant on the good will	146
5.	Hegel on the good will	148
6.	Moral worth and psychological causality	150
7.	Hegel's critique of Kant	152
9	The emptiness of the moral law	154
1.	The emptiness charge	154
2.	Kant's formula of universal law	155
3.	Contradictions and conflicting volitions	156
4.	The universal law test	158
5.	Some unsolved problems	160
6.	Kant's deduction of the moral law	161
7.	The failure of Kant's deduction	163
8.	Universal applicability and collective rationality	165
9.	The emptiness of the moral will	167
10.	Ends and empirical motivation	169
11.	Emptiness and Hegelian morality	172
10	Conscience	174
1.	The role of conscience in Hegelian ethics	174
2.	Fichte's moral epistemology	176
3.	Fries and the ethics of conviction	178
4.	A problem about moral error and blame	180
5.	Some solutions to the problem	181
6.	Mistaken criticisms of Fries	183
7.	The emptiness of an ethics of conviction	185
8.	The hypocrisy of conscience	187
9.	The right of insight	189
10.	Insight and responsibility	191

CONTENTS

Part IV: Ethical life

11	Ethical objectivity	195
	1. What is "ethical life"?	195
	2. The two sides of ethical life	196
	3. Ethical life as spirit	198
	4. The ethical order	199
	5. Ethical individuality	200
	6. Romantic pluralism	202
	7. Hegel's universalism	203
	8. Individuality as an ethical principle	205
	9. The ethical as a universal standard	206
12	Ethical subjectivity	209
	1. The ethical disposition	209
	2. Ethical duty	209
	3. Duties of relationships	211
	4. Relational duties and universal reflection	212
	5. Ethical virtue	214
	6. Virtue and rectitude	215
	7. Ethical life and subjective reflection	217
13	The limits of ethics	219
	1. The transitoriness of the ethical	219
	2. The ethical life-cycle	221
	3. History's supreme right	223
	4. History and relativism	225
	5. World historical individuals	226
	6. Beyond the ethical	228
	7. Exercising the right to do wrong	230
	8. Historical self-opacity	232
	9. Hegel's amorality	234
14	Problems of modern ethical life	237
	1. The principle of the modern state	237
	2. Rationality and subjectivity	238
	3. Civil society: subjective freedom and corporate spirit	239
	4. Hegel's dilemma: subjective freedom or ethical goals	241
	5. Substantiality and reflection	243
	6. Man and woman	244
	7. Poverty in civil society	247
	8. Does Hegel have an answer?	248
	9. The rabble mentality	250
	10. The class with neither rights nor duties	253
	11. Ethical self-destruction	254

CONTENTS

Conclusion	256
1. Ethics and society	256
2. Hegel as liberal	257
3. Hegel versus liberalism	258
4. The free society	259
<i>Notes</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	285

Introduction

1. Hegel as speculative philosopher

Hegel holds that philosophy is a wholly unique discipline, which deals with unique objects and employs a unique method (*EL* §§ 1–4). Philosophy is distinguished both from everyday common sense and from the empirical sciences by the way it abstracts from their concerns, and grasps in their purity the “determinations of thought” which, unnoticed, provide everyday life and inquiry with their genuine content (*EL* § 5; *WL* 5: 38/45). In Hegel’s view, the foundation of all philosophy is the self-evolving system of these abstract thought-determinations, presented in the purely philosophical discipline of speculative logic.

Hegel sees traditional Aristotelian logic as an empty, formal discipline; he intends speculative logic to transform it into a science with profound metaphysical content (*EL* § 24). Speculative logic will thereby provide a metaphysical key to the a priori comprehension of all reality, enabling philosophy to encompass and systematize the results of empirical science and give to them an a priori character (*EL* § 12). In so doing, it will overcome the alien, accidental, and objective form taken by these facts in the modern empirical sciences (*EL* § 7), exhibiting the inner essence of the objective world as at one with our own freedom as thinkers (*EL* § 23).¹ Hegel thus regards his own philosophical achievement as fundamentally a contribution to metaphysics or “first philosophy.”

Hegel is the most methodologically self-conscious of all philosophers in the Western tradition. There is no modern philosopher, not even excepting Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, who displays greater originality in laying the methodological foundations of a philosophical system. This is Hegel’s main project during his Jena period, culminating in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807. It is a side of Hegel seldom appreciated, because Hegel’s methodological reflections are a response to the problems of ancient Pyrrhonic skepticism, rather than to the skeptical worries of the post-Cartesian tradition, which Hegel always esteemed less highly than he did the ancient skeptical tradition.²

2. Dialectical logic

The lifeblood of Hegel’s system of speculative logic is the famous Hegelian dialectic. Hegel’s dialectic may be viewed as a highly novel theory of philo-

INTRODUCTION

sophical paradoxes: where and why philosophical thought runs into them, what they mean, how to deal with them. Kant argues that when human reason attempts to extend its cognition beyond the bounds of possible experience, it not only is tempted to make unwarranted claims to knowledge, but also is in danger of falling into contradictions (antinomies); the only way to avoid them is by carefully observing the proper limits of its cognitive powers. The part of this account Hegel retains is the idea that our thinking has an inherent tendency to go beyond every limit, and thus to undermine or overthrow itself. He associates this idea with the human self's tendency to change, develop, and progress through a process involving a stage of self-conflict followed by its resolution.³

Hegel holds that a thought determination is what it is because it is determined (or limited) in a definite way. But each such thought has an inherent tendency to push beyond its limit and turn into its opposite, resulting in a contradiction. This "dialectic" of thought determinations, as Hegel calls it, is a cause of consternation to the "understanding" – that analytical disposition of thought which tries to grasp thought determinations in their determinacy, keeping them clearly and distinctly separated from one another. For the understanding, dialectic is a source of scandal and paradox, something to avoid at all costs. But the understanding's efforts are to no avail, because thought itself is dynamic, self-transcending, fundamentally dialectical. Kant realized that thoughts obey the understanding's rules only so long as they remain within their proper bounds. Hegel hastens to add that they have an inherent tendency not to remain confined, a tendency that is as much a part of their nature as the neat analytical definitions within which the understanding wants to confine them. Dialectical paradoxes cannot be avoided, done away with, or treated as mere illusions, as the understanding would wish. They are real, unavoidable, virtually omnipresent.

Hegel argues that the proper way to resolve dialectical paradoxes is not to suppress them, but to systematize them. If you become master of them, they can do positive philosophical work for you. Just as thought inevitably gives rise to contradictions, so it also inevitably reconciles them in a higher unity, as a human self that grows through self-conflict proves its growth by emerging from the conflict into a higher self-harmony. For example, Kant's Second Antinomy opposes the infinite divisibility of the real in space to the indivisibility of its smallest parts (A434/B462). Hegel thinks the antinomy can be resolved by recognizing that the concept of quantity contains within itself both of the opposed determinations, discreteness and continuity (WL 5: 216–227/190–199; cf. *EL* § 100). Kant resolves the antinomy by saying that as a mere appearance, matter is *neither* infinitely divisible nor composed of simples (A502–507/B530–53 6); Hegel resolves it by saying that matter is *both* at once. It can be both because our thought may legitimately employ both conceptions involving discreteness and conceptions involving continuity in its theorizing about matter.

In effect, Hegel resolves philosophical paradoxes such as the Second Antinomy by relying on an idealist or constructivist picture of the relation of

INTRODUCTION

theory to reality. If reality is constituted by our thought about it, and that thought systematically involves contrasting (even contradictory) aspects or moments, then reality itself must embody the same contradictions. Contradictory thinking about reality is tolerable if we are capable (via the understanding) of distinguishing clearly between the contradictory aspects of our thought, and also (via speculative reason) of reconciling the contradictions in a higher theoretical conception.

We might compare Hegel's treatment of philosophical paradoxes with the later Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein held that contradictions or paradoxes do not "make our language less usable" because, once we "know our way about" and become clear about exactly where and why they arise, we can "seal them off"; we need not view a contradiction as "the local symptom of a sickness of the whole body."⁴ For Wittgenstein contradictions can be tolerated because they are marginal and we can keep them sequestered from the rest of our thinking; for Hegel, they arise systematically in the course of philosophical thought, but they do no harm so long as a system of speculative logic can keep them in their proper place, refusing them admittance to those contexts in which they would do harm. Thus Hegel claims that the old-fashioned logic of the understanding is just a limiting case of speculative logic, which we obtain simply by omitting the dialectical element in thought (*EL* § 82).

The guarantee that contradictions need not ultimately disrupt thinking is provided by the higher unity, in which the opposites are reconciled and the proper place of each is simultaneously determined. For example, the opposition between continuous quantity and discrete quantity leads to a contradiction when we don't realize that the concept of quantity contains both (*WL* 5: 229/200). Their difference is overcome in the concept of a determinate quantity or a quantum. This concept sets limits to simple continuity, and hence supersedes (*aufhebt*) the opposition between continuous and discrete quantity (*WL* 5: 230/201).

Hegel has a broader and a narrower conception of dialectic. Sometimes he includes the "positive reason" that "grasps opposites in their unity" within "dialectic" (*WL* 5: 52/56), but sometimes he calls this stage "speculation" or "positive reason," in contrast to "dialectic" or "negative reason" (*EL* § 82). Negative reason is the activity of reason that drives thought determinations beyond themselves and engenders the contradictions that so plague the understanding; speculation or positive reason reconciles contradictions in a higher unity, enabling them to be included in a rational system. In the system of speculative logic, each thought determination leads to another that opposes it, and that opposition leads in turn to a new determination in which the opposition is overcome.

(The regrettable tradition of expounding this theme in the Hegelian dialectic through the grotesque jargon of "thesis," "antithesis," and "synthesis" began in 1837 with Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus, a bowdlerizer of German idealist philosophy, whose ridiculous expository devices should have been forgotten along with his name.⁵ This triad of terms is used by both Fichte and Schelling, though never to express the Hegelian ideas we have just been

INTRODUCTION

examining; to my knowledge, it is never used by Hegel, not even once, for this purpose or for any other. The use of Chalybäus's terminology to expound the Hegelian dialectic is nearly always an unwitting confession that the expositor has little or no firsthand knowledge of Hegel.)

Hegel's speculative logic attempts to run through all basic determinations of thought in a systematic way, assigning each its proper place within the development. At the pinnacle of the system is the "Idea" – thought's tendency to actualize itself by going outside itself. Hegel associates the Idea with the ontological proof for God's existence, since the Idea exhibits the capacity of the highest thought directly to demonstrate its own existence (*EL* § 64). But the Idea also represents, in religious terms, God's creation of the world. The Idea is thought's proceeding beyond itself to give itself immediate reality in finite, sensuous nature (*EL* § 244). Hegel's system, comprising the philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit, attempts to develop the structure of the world of nature and the world of the human mind, using the categories and movement of the system of speculative logic as its key. Nature is thought going outside itself; mind or spirit is its return to itself. As a natural being, the human being, through its awareness of itself as thought, transcends the merely natural to the level of the spiritual. "Spirit" embraces not only "subjective spirit" (or individual psychology), but also "objective spirit" (society or culture, culminating in the political state), and finally "absolute spirit," the realms of art, religion, and philosophy – those forms of higher human culture in which spirit becomes aware of itself as absolute, or the ultimate reality.

3. Speculative logic is dead; but Hegel's thought is not

We must admire the boldness of Hegel's methodological conception in the *Phenomenology*, but we must also admit that Hegel's hopelessly ambitious project proves utterly unconvincing in its execution. Even Hegel himself perhaps tacitly abandoned the *Phenomenology* as the foundation of his system in the Heidelberg *Encyclopedia* (1817), where he relegated the contents of *PhG* Chapters 1–5 to a subordinate part of the philosophy of spirit. The Berlin *Encyclopedia* (1827, 1830) includes a new introduction to the system (*EL* §§ 1–83). This introduction expresses reservations about the *Phenomenology*'s procedure as a starting point, at the same time candidly confessing itself encumbered with the identical defects to an even greater extent (*EL* § 25R).

Viewed from a late twentieth-century perspective, it is evident that Hegel totally failed in his attempt to canonize speculative logic as the only proper form of philosophical thinking. Many of the philosophical paradoxes Hegel needs in order to make his system work are based on shallow sophistries; the resolution to paradoxes supplied by his system is often artificial and unilluminating. When the theory of logic actually was revolutionized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the new theory was built upon precisely

INTRODUCTION

those features of traditional logic that Hegel thought most dispensable. In light of it, philosophical sanity now usually judges that the most promising way to deal with the paradoxes that plague philosophy is the understanding's way. Hegel's system of dialectical logic has never won acceptance outside an isolated and dwindling tradition of incorrigible enthusiasts.

Of course, the history of philosophy is a history of spectacular failures. Descartes failed to put the sciences on an absolutely indubitable basis in his first philosophy. Kant also failed to establish metaphysics as the forever closed and finished science of the transcendental forms of empirical knowledge. Yet Hegel's failure was essentially more final and unredeemable than theirs, since even the problems of Hegel's logic remain alien and artificial to us in ways that the problems of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy do not. As one recent scholar of Hegel's method confesses, the short answer to the question "What is living in the logic of Hegel?" is: "Nothing."⁶

Because Hegel regards speculative logic as the foundation of his system, we might conclude from its failure that nothing in his philosophy could any longer be deserving of our interest. But that would be quite wrong. The fact is rather that Hegel's great positive achievements as a philosopher do not lie where he thought they did, in his system of speculative logic, but in quite a different realm, in his reflections on the social and spiritual predicament of modern Western European culture. Like no one before, and perhaps no one since, Hegel's thought explores the self-conception of modern human beings, the ambivalent relation of modern European culture to its Hebraic-Hellenic heritage, its quest in the modern world for a new image of nature and society, its hopes and self-doubts, its needs and aspirations.

Soon after his death, the influence of Hegel's philosophy began to decline rapidly. Hegel was held in quite low esteem during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the present one. Hegel's contribution to the "human sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was always acknowledged even during those periods, however, at least in the German tradition.⁷ It was also this side of Hegel's thought that since the 1930s has led to a remarkable resurgence of interest in his philosophy. The situation was already quite clear to Ernst Cassirer nearly a half century ago:

[Hegel's] logic and metaphysics were at first regarded as the strongest bulwarks of his system; yet it was precisely from this side that the system was open to the most violent and dangerous attacks. And after a short struggle they seemed to have been successful. Yet Hegelianism has had a rebirth not in the field of logical or metaphysical thought, but in the field of political thought. There has hardly been a single great political system that has resisted its influence. All our modern political ideologies show us the strength, the durability and permanence of the principles that were first introduced and defended in Hegel's philosophy of right and his philosophy of history.⁸

The living traditions that derive from Hegel's thought – the traditions of Marxist social theory and existential philosophy – are distinctly antimetaphysical in their orientation. The Hegel who still lives and speaks to us is not a speculative logician and idealist metaphysician but a philosophical his-

INTRODUCTION

torian, a political and social theorist, a philosopher of our ethical concerns and cultural identity crises.

4. Speculative philosophy and modern society

This is not necessarily to contradict the assertion that we cannot understand Hegel's social and political concerns without reference to his speculative metaphysics.⁹ But we are likely to miss the connection between the two if (with Hegel) we suppose that Hegelian social thought is *grounded* in Hegelian metaphysics, and conclude that speculative logic is a propaedeutic to Hegel's theory of modern society. In fact, the relation between the two may be very nearly the reverse of this; often Hegel's treatment of metaphysical issues is best viewed as an attempt to interpret these issues as an expression of cultural and existential concerns. The most influential recent interpretation of Hegel's philosophy, that of Charles Taylor's *Hegel* (1975), understands Hegel's metaphysics essentially as an "expressivist" vision of human agency and its products, viewing Hegel's entire philosophy as a response to the cultural predicament of the post-Enlightenment.¹⁰ If Hegel understood his philosophy as the activity of pure thought-thinking itself, its legacy has rather been that of enabling us to understand how all human thought expresses its concrete social and cultural context.

Even Hegel's own conception of his task speaks in favor of regarding his philosophy as fundamentally occupied with cultural self-understanding and practical self-concern. In 1801, Hegel opens his first piece of published writing with a meditation on "the need of philosophy" in the present age. He sees this need as arising at a time when the unreflective harmony of human individuals with themselves and their world has been rent by a culture based on reflection; and he assigns philosophy the task of reestablishing this harmony at a higher level through reason (*D* 20–21/89–91). In his last published work, the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel assigns to philosophy essentially the same function: reconciling reflective individuals with the world, and above all with the social world, through a speculative cognition of the actual in its rationality (*PR* Preface 27).¹¹ If an understanding of Hegel's thinking about human selfhood and society refers us to his metaphysics, it is because the principal aim of Hegel's metaphysics is to address the predicament of modern humanity in modern society.

Georg Lukacs acknowledges this point when he says: "The entire Hegelian philosophy is essentially oriented to the knowledge of society and history. Hence its categories are by their very nature adapted to this sphere of being."¹² But once again it is not as though Hegel's social philosophy drives us constantly back to the categories of his metaphysics as to some source of esoteric wisdom. The point is rather that Hegel sees his metaphysics as the foundation of a philosophy that deals with the modern predicament because his own deepest response to the modern predicament is a response on the level of metaphysics or speculative philosophy. Hegel's response to the alienation of modern life is not (like Schiller's or Schelling's) aesthetic, nor (like

INTRODUCTION

Schleiermacher's) religious. Still less does Hegel respond (like Kant and Fichte) by turning the struggle inward to the individual's moral life, nor (like Marx) does he turn it outward to social revolution. Hegel seeks to overcome alienation by rationally reconciling us to the world, comprehending a divine reason, akin to our own, immanent in it.

Hegel makes many extravagant claims for his philosophy, even to the point of arrogating the terms "philosophy" and "science" as nicknames for his own system. But in view of the fact that Hegel's language and ideas often strike us as bewilderingly novel and unfamiliar, it is especially noteworthy that one distinction he never claims for it is *originality*. Hegel sees himself rather as a synthetic, encyclopedic thinker whose task is to reconcile the wisdom of ancient Greek metaphysics with the faith of the Christian religion, reinterpreting both in terms of the modern claims of free subjectivity and Enlightenment reason. Thus in *The Science of Logic* Hegel conceives his task not as that of "building a new city in a wasteland" but rather as "remodeling an ancient city, solidly built, and maintained in continuous possession and occupation" (WL 6: 243/575). Hegel does not see himself as the architect of a new system or method like Descartes, still less as the destroyer of a tradition like Nietzsche or Heidegger. He is rather the restorer of an ancient building in need of repair; his original contribution, such as it is, consists in buttressing it through the use of recently acquired materials and engineering techniques, so that it may once again be a sound structure in which to live.

It is this modest and ingenuous self-conception that leads Hegel to speak of his own system simply as "science" or "philosophy." He is as far as possible in this regard from his Romantic contemporaries who thought of both philosophy and art as products of individual genius, monuments to the idiosyncrasy of their self-celebrating creators. For Hegel, a sound philosophical system is not anyone's personal creation at all. In his view, the content of his system is merely the Western philosophical tradition, appropriated by the reflective spirit of modernity. The aim of philosophy is to vindicate *die Sache selbst*, and it can do this only if it owes as little as possible to the unique personality of the individual who happens to formulate it.

In contrast with his misestimate of himself as primarily a metaphysician and speculative logician, Hegel's self-understanding on this point seems to me to contain a good deal of truth, especially regarding ethical topics. In the area of moral philosophy, Hegel's thought represents an attempt, in many ways strikingly successful, to remodel classical ethical theory, exhibiting its fundamental soundness by investing it with the style, and adapting it to the content, of a modern self-understanding. Like Goethe's poetry, Hegel's ethical thought is an attempt to marry the classical ideal with the modern, to unite the harmony of Greek culture with the reflective spirit of the Enlightenment, so as to conceive the modern social order as one in which Faustian aspirations can reach fulfillment without violating the requirements of classical form.

Hegel's achievement lies in his sensitivity to the diverse aspirations of modern humanity, his ability to relate these aspirations to their historical roots

INTRODUCTION

and their focus in social institutions, and his success in integrating these aspirations into a single conception of the modern spirit. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* articulates our deepest human needs and is sensitive to their diversity and the destructive possibilities that such diversity presents. It points the way to a society in which reflective, rational, and self-integrated individuals can satisfy all of their needs simultaneously, without the regret of lost alternatives or tragic choices between incompatible and incommensurable goods.

For Hegel, of course, its chief significance is philosophical or speculative: to exhibit the social world and one's role in it as rationally satisfying because it is the actualization of reason, the work of divine providence, manifest to the philosopher even in the most worldly aspects of life. Few of Hegel's readers today find it natural to adopt rational theodicy as their fundamental relation to their cultural predicament. Accordingly, they should be more willing than he was to consider Hegel's conception of the vocation of modern individuals and its fulfillment in the modern state in their practical meaning – as a project in rational ethics. To read Hegel in this way is, admittedly, to read him in some measure against his own self-understanding; it is nevertheless the only way in which most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, can read him seriously at all. Such a reading requires that we first look closely at Hegel's own conception of his philosophical project, so that we may see clearly where it leaves room for the possibility of a Hegelian ethical theory.

5. Does Hegel have an ethics?

It is sometimes said, by Hegel's sympathizers as well as his detractors, that Hegel's system contains no "ethics" at all, that for Hegel moral philosophy is "dissolved in sociology" or "absorbed in political philosophy".¹³ Such remarks are misleading exaggerations, but there is some truth in them if they are understood in the right way.

Hegel's philosophy is fundamentally a speculative metaphysics whose aim is to overcome, through philosophical insight, the alienation of the modern mind from itself, nature, and society. Because of this, in Hegel's mature system even "practical philosophy" is treated from a contemplative perspective – as a stage in spirit's self-knowledge (*EG* §§ 469–552). Thus Hegel treats "the will" not from the perspective of the volitional agent engaging in practical deliberation, but from the perspective of the speculative philosopher contemplating the will and its mode of actualization. Likewise, the avowed aim of the *Philosophy of Right* is not to tell the state how it ought to be, but rather to provide us with a rational theodicy of modern social life, by exhibiting the actuality of divine reason and the rationality of the social world it has created (*PR* Preface 24–28).

It is simply false to say that Hegel's philosophy aims at justifying the social and political status quo. On the contrary, Hegel insists that every existing state, standing as it does in the sphere of transitoriness and contingency, is disfigured to some extent by error and wickedness, and fails to be wholly rational, because it fails to be wholly actual (*PR* § 258A). The *Philosophy of*

INTRODUCTION

Right clearly leaves room for rational criticism of what exists, and also for practical efforts to improve the existing state by actualizing it, bringing it more into harmony with its own rational essence or concept.

Hegel does deny, however, that such criticism belongs among the tasks of *philosophy*:

For who is not clever enough to see much in his environment that is not in fact as it ought to be? But this cleverness is wrong to imagine that such objects and their "ought" have any place within the interests of philosophical science. For science has to do only with the Idea, which is not so impotent that it only ought to be without actually being; hence philosophy has to do with an actuality of which those objects, institutions, conditions, etc. are only the superficial outside. (*EL* § 6; cf. *PR* Preface 25)

The rhetorical question that introduces this passage is in effect a declaration that no one (least of all Hegel) is so stupid as to claim that the status quo is always as it ought to be. Yet the passage contains two other controversial ideas which, though they do not deny that much in the world is not as it ought to be, nevertheless tend to denigrate the importance often attached to this obvious truth by partisans of the "understanding." The first is an idea about the scope and aim of philosophy. Hegel claims that although it may often be correct to say that social institutions and conditions are not as they should be, it is always wrong to regard such assertions (even where they are correct) as of interest to "philosophical science." For the task of philosophy (conceived here in 1830 very much as it was in the *Differenzschrift* of 1801) is to heal the division or bifurcation (*Entzweiung*) which the modern principle of reflection has opened between our minds and the world; it effects this healing by exhibiting to our reason the world's own deep inner rationality.

We might take Hegel to be agreeing with Aristotle that the highest end of reason is philosophical contemplation and not the ends of practice in the narrower sense (*VGP* 2: 167/151). But Hegel opposes speculative cognition both to theory and to practice, treating it as a higher unity in which both are contained. The absolute Idea lies beyond both the Idea of cognition and the Idea of the good (*EL* § 236), just as the realm of absolute spirit transcends both theoretical and practical spirit (*EG* § 553). Hegel's view seems to be that speculative wisdom belongs equally in contemplation of the reason that shows itself in the world, and in practice that actualizes reason in the world – just as art, religion, and philosophy nourish the human spirit equally in its cognition and its action.

This conception of philosophy rests on a second controversial idea: that although there is much in the contingent, transitory world of existence and appearance that is not as it ought to be, nevertheless the inner essence of things, viewed by speculative reason in its necessity, is inevitably seen to be fully rational and hence spiritually satisfying. Because of this there can be a genuine "science" of speculative logic, which deals entirely with the "thought determinations" that constitute the conceptual essence of the world, and display themselves in external reality. This science is philosophy proper, and its object is solely the "Idea" – the self-realizing rational concept, or the "ab-

INTRODUCTION

solute unity of the concept and objectivity" (*EL* § 213). In the "real" part of philosophical science, the outward forms taken by thought in the worlds of nature and human society can be reappropriated by the human spirit through our cognition of them. Hegel is convinced that once we have tasted of this purely philosophical science and its truth, we will want to distinguish it from all other standpoints on the world, including the practical one, and to treat them all as essentially inferior.

6. Rationality and actuality

This is the point of Hegel's saying, "The rational is actual, and the actual is rational." In his own exegesis of the saying, Hegel is at pains to distinguish what is "actual" from what merely "exists." The "actual," he says, includes only those existents that fully express and correspond to their essence (*EL* §§ 6, 142). Such an existent Hegel calls an "appearance" or "phenomenon" (*Erscheinung*) (*EL* § 131). The transitory existents that we encounter in everyday life (including societies and states) often fail to be "actual," fail to be "appearances" of their "essence." In them the outer expression is inadequate to the inner essence; and an existent that is imperfect in this way Hegel calls "illusion" or "show" (*Schein*) (*WL* 6: 17/394; *EL* § 131A). (Hegel's use of the term *Schein* is likely to mislead, since "illusions" in this sense – e.g., evil or sick human beings, badly organized or unjust states – certainly *exist* every bit as much as "actualities" do.)

What is actual is rational. But one must know, distinguish, what is in fact actual. In common life all is actual, but [in philosophy] there is a distinction between the world of appearance and actuality. The actual has also an external existence, which displays arbitrariness and contingency. . . . Men will always be wicked and depraved, but this is not the Idea. On the surface passions wrestle everywhere, but that is not the actuality of substance. The temporal and transitory certainly exists, and may cause us enough distress; but in spite of that it, along with the particularity of the subject and its wishes and inclinations, is no true actuality. (*VGP* 2: 110–111/95–96)

Hegel distinguishes between the rational "essence," whose adequate appearance is the "actual," and the "transitory, contingent, superficial exterior," which this essence wears in the sphere of finitude. In effect, this is Hegel's way of drawing the distinction between God and creation; God is the "rational essence" of things, whereas creation is their "superficial exterior" (*WL* 5: 44/50). Because "philosophy is the true theodicy" (*VGP* 3: 455/546; *VPG* 28/15), the only true subject matter of philosophy is God, and philosophy proper occupies itself with the finite world only to the extent that the divine presence is immanent in it – that is, only to the extent that the finite is "actual." The defects of finitude exist, but they are superficial contingencies, justified by the fact that contingency itself is a necessary factor in God's self-manifestation (*WL* 6: 180/542–553; *EL* § 145A).¹⁴

Hegel's philosophy of the state justifies not the status quo, but God; it hallows not the political order but the divine revealing itself in the spiritual realm of the state, just as it does in the lower realm of nature (*PR* Preface